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Species-Beings in Crisis: UBI and the Nature of Work

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ABSTRACT Marx famously argued that labor, under capitalism, alienates humans from not only the products of their labor, but from their very nature. Further, capitalist labor presents a "double freedom" for the worker that is, of course, anything but free: the freedom to either work for an exploitive boss, or to refuse, and starve. UBI would seemingly allow for way out of such a conundrum, but would it also open the door to allow humanity to regain their status as "speciesbeings"? I explore the idea of UBI as presenting an opportunity for meaningful work and a subversion of the logic of capital. Does UBI indeed grant workers more freedom, or does it merely contribute to the continued denigration of social relations under capital?

At a time when, after wage stagnation lasting decades and the erosion of many social programs, working class people are living more and more precariously, it should come as no surprise that interest in the concept of a universal basic income (UBI) is rising. Here, I want to focus on UBI's potential not as an economic intervention per se but on the ways in which it may illuminate how capitalist social relations have eroded humans' relationship to meaningful work, using Marx's concept of "species-being."

Capitalist labor perverts the relationship between humans and the natural objects around them and "turns for them the life of the species into a means of individual life," wherein work becomes only that thing one does to merely stay alive. 1

This alienation stands in stark opposition to Marx's thoughts about human nature: that we are meant to engage in "free conscious activity" in order to actualize ourselves as human beings. Work is the distinctive capacity of the human species – what distinguishes us as "species-beings" –but capitalism perverts this desire, turning it from productive to consumptive. I argue that the greatest strength of UBI is the ways in which it exposes this truth about capitalist social relations. UBI could, potentially, intervene in wage labor in such a way as to return humans to something closer to their essence by subverting the structure of waged labor. Its potential to expose the contradictions between classes and the function and nature of labor is strong, but so far, as a political tool, it has not lived up to its promise.

The idea of returning to a more productive species-life is creeping into cultural forms beyond the strict discussion of UBI. Sometime this past summer, I came across a photo posted to the Instagram account of the home décor magazine *Domino*. It looked like any other impossibly chic, contemporary living room—whitewashed walls; wood floors; soft, buttery, yet somehow still minimalistic leather chairs. But what caught my eye was a poster hanging near the French doors that read "My dream is to become a farmer, just a bohemian pulling up my own sweet potatoes for dinner." 3

Eyeroll, gag. Do the bougie owners of that house really think that farm labor is that romantic and easy? Why would they hang such a message in their clearly very expensive

and comfortable home, one that was certainly not bought with the profits of farm labor?

Currently, as a great many of us in the United States order our necessities through our smartphones, whine when free two-day shipping isn't available, and think very little of the conditions of production, a fascination with handmade, artisanal objects, organically grown food, and a return to a "simpler time" (whenever that was) permeates pop culture, particularly in city centers. Jean Baudriallard has argued that in the postmodern city, "we are at the end of production": labor in the traditional sense has vanished, and has been surpassed by "the structural revolution of value." The city is a place of consumption, not production, "an immense centre for marshalling and enclosure where the system reproduces itself not only economically and spatially, but also in depth by the ramifications of signs and codes, by the symbolic destruction of social relations." While it is not altogether true that production has ceased to exist, it has largely moved to the Global South, so that in the American imaginary, it may as well have. Production has ceased to be necessary to understand social relations, though, of course, capital has not. Baudrillard argues that Marx's materialist account of the labor theory of value has been replaced with a structural law of value, wherein exploitation under capitalism has shifted from the sphere of production to that of consumption. Labor has collapsed into consumption, and, in a continuation of Adorno and Horkheimer, leisure time becomes a form of complex labor that reproduces labor power. 6 Thus the idea of actually farming does not even really matter here; it is in consumption that the real work happens, and consumers are all too happy to make the choice to work for capital. The poster itself was most likely merely a consumer choice, reflecting a value system that can be bought for the right price at the right shop.

However, I nonetheless want to posit that the poster could also be generously read as a longing for work, for a reconnection to what capitalism has taken away from us. This sort of fantasy may well indeed speak to the estranged nature of labor in the current conjecture. The poster isn't a request to *be* a farmer per se; rather, it is a wish to engage in productive self-sustaining work, or "conscious life-activity," the kind of work that capitalist social relations deny us. Z Reading the poster in this way helps to make clear, I believe, the fundamental alienation of labor under capitalism, and the ways in which these relations further remove humans from their capacities as "species-beings."

Under capitalism, Marx argued, labor is not the satisfaction of a need in itself, but rather, a means to satisfy needs external of it. The product of labor is strictly material; labor produces only commodities, including the worker herself, and estranges the worker from the products of her labor. Even worse, while the worker produces "wonderful things" for the rich, from "palaces" to surplus value, he becomes more and more degraded and devalued. This is not only due to the wage disparity, but to what Marx outlines as the third aspect of estranged labor: self-estrangement.

Other modern theorists have echoed Marx's concern with the dissatisfaction humans feel with work: they work only because of the things it will get them, out of necessity, or for advantage. Guiseppe Rensi, B. F. Skinner, Randall Collins, and Sigmund Freud all "shared the conviction that behavior is an exchange process." Work was seen as a constraint imposed by "civilization," and one that brought humans great unhappiness. None of those thinkers, of course, attributed any of this to social relations under capitalism—even as they used telling phrases like "exchange process" to describe the dire situation. Perhaps if they had been following in the Marxist tradition, they would have chosen the word *labor* rather than work, since what they were describing was alienated and exploited work within capitalist social relations, a historical category, as opposed to work in a broader sense, an anthropological category. 10

Marx introduces the term "species-being" to argue that the distinctively human activity is not, as many in the philosophical tradition have put forth, thought, but "conscious-life activity," *productive* activity, "labor in accordance with ones own conscious deliberation." ¹¹ For Marx, work is a creative, fulfilling activity, the "life-activity" of humans. There exists for Marx no natural inclination against work; rather, work is at the heart of what makes humans human. Marx's concept of "species-being" thus grounds his critique of capitalism. ¹²

Philosopher Thomas Wartenberg argues that Marx was engaging in a radical reconceptualization of the philosophic tradition's use of the idea of human essence, and one that democratizes, for it does not distinguish among the type of activity that one chooses to engage in but rather values productive activity for its own sake. ¹³ Humans are meant to be producers, not consumers, Marx argues, and they are not meant to suffer in their work under the sway of their capitalist master. "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs." But under capitalism, one's labor "does not belong to his essential being," and becomes a labor of "self-sacrifice, of mortification." ¹⁴ Labor estranges humans from themselves and from nature, and "turns . . . the life of the species into a means of individual life." ¹⁵ Our species-life, our essential nature, has now been left behind under social relations that degrade free and spontaneous activity, and the products of our labor, performed "under the dominion, the coercion and the yoke of another man," now belong to someone else. ¹⁶

The concept of a "work ethic," particularly in the US, endures and ignores this perverted relationship. Its naturalization and divorce from historical circumstance has taken on a moral dimension. This ideology vilifies those who cannot work for a wage or appear to not work hard enough, such as those who "leech off the state" or who are stuck in dead-ends or majored in something useless like cultural studies. These people have apparently brought it on themselves thanks to their laziness and bad choices; meanwhile, labor has reached new heights of exploitation. Most workers aren't considered employees, thanks to the dismantling of labor laws and the rise of the gig economy against a backdrop of neoliberalism and austerity. Many of these workers need assistance programs to fill in the gaps, putting pressure on an already under-taxed system (it is thus clear who is really leeching from the state's coffers: Jeff Bezos, for one). Estrangement is at an all-time high as apps mete out paltry wages without benefits; the side hustle is the new normal. And this isn't even to speak of the legalized slavery of, for example, the American prison or the Thai shrimp boat, or the ways in which capitalists profit from immaterial labor and debt. Globally, workers have less power and mobility than perhaps ever before, and wealth continues to consolidate and grow in the hands of fewer and fewer powerful elites. If there was ever a time to get out of the death trap of labor, this is it.

Now this of course would take a large-scale revolution and the seizing of the means of production—but we will leave that for another forum. Here we are focused on the usefulness of UBI in addressing the problems of material deprivation, and I want to question its utility in challenging the conception of labor under capitalism. I suggest that, fundamentally, the concept of a UBI makes clear the exploitive nature of wage-labor. This I believe I can say for sure: UBI reveals the ways in which some types of labor are degraded and thus un- or under-paid. But "making clear" is not the same as "dismantling," and I want to further suggest that UBI may, unfortunately, allow for the prolonged preservation of capital-labor relations; thus, it would have little to no effect on the nature of work itself and the fulfillment of the worker's desire for conscious life-activity.

Existing UBI experiments have not paid enough to divorce wage-labor from a decent standard of living. A recent VICE magazine exploration of basic income reveals that many of the recipients of a pilot program in Hamilton, Ontario, spoke of the ways in which the

payments helped to "cut the struggle," but not eliminate it totally. ¹⁷ UBI may thus only add to the degradation of labor. If UBI does not fundamentally alter social relations, then waged labor will continue on as it has and may even stagnate. Why would workers organize for more if their needs are met, and why would capitalists pay more when the state has stepped in? In fact, a UBI pilot program in Finland was designed to "see how a basic unconditional income affects the employment of unemployed people," ensuring that wage-labor carries on as usual. ¹⁸

UBI would thus also fall flat in helping to broaden our conception of work and in allowing us to live more fully as species-beings. If a worker is not feeling the stress and strain of covering their basic necessities, they could perhaps focus on the job for itself. The natural inclination to work may ensure that the worker finds fulfillment. But the job still exists within a capitalist framework; thus, the worker is still alienated from the products of her labor. And unfortunately, UBI, as it has so far been suggested and implemented, does nothing to alter these realities. Take the "Freedom Dividend," a \$1000 monthly payment currently promoted by Andrew Yang, tech executive and 2020 presidential hopeful. Yang is concerned about a future nearly devoid of jobs as we have known them and argues for his UBI program because he "believe(s) that universal basic income is necessary for capitalism to continue." 19 Jordan Pearson, covering UBI programs for Vice, is clearly concerned that the UBI trials of today "not only fall painfully short of holding societychanging promise, but their failures could be used as cover for even more restrictive social programs." 20 These trials pay just enough to keep people at the poverty line, thus forcing them to continue to work for companies who exploit them and deny them living wages. A UBI of this type will merely prop up current relations, and, as Yang hopes, allow capitalism -and estranged labor-to continue unabated.

As Shannon Ikebe has argued in *Jacobin*, "a basic income only addresses the question of distribution, while ignoring that of production. The kind of freedom from work—or freedom through work, which becomes 'life's prime want'—that an UBI envisions is, in all likelihood, not compatible with capitalism's requirements of profitability."²¹ UBI has the potential to shift the nature and meaning of labor by revealing its exploitive nature, and this may pave the way to a more just, full life. But it remains to be seen whether UBI puts pressure on the existing system or further contributes to its degradation.

Notes

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- 3. Available on Etsy for \$85; apparently, it is a Lenny Kravitz quote. https://www.etsy.com/listing/494422138/my-dream-is-to-become-a-farmer-just-a.
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- 6. Tim Dant, *Critical Social Theory: Culture, Society and Critique* (London: Sage, 2003), 57.
- 7. Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., 76.
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♣ Bio



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Kimberly Klinger received her PhD from the Cultural Studies program at George Mason University in 2016. She received her Bachelors from Penn State University, majoring in Letters, Arts, and Sciences; and her Masters from George Washington University in Women's Studies with a focus on Media Theory. Kimberly lives and works in Washington, DC, and has taught at George Mason University and the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.